Between practice and research: The Honours undergraduate experience at an Australian conservatorium

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Published
2013

Conference Title
EDULEARN13: 5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION AND NEW LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

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BETWEEN PRACTICE AND RESEARCH: THE HONOURS UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE AT AN AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATORIUM

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Abstract

Fourth year dissertation-based undergraduate Honours programs in Australia serve both as a professional qualification and as a PhD entry criteria. In the creative arts and music disciplines in particular, these features take on additional meaning given an emphasis on applied skills and in relation to the rise of practice-based higher degree research programmes. This paper interrogates a number of indicative Honours projects, subsequently argued as a transitional space important to pedagogical approaches, professional outcomes, and higher degree research training more broadly.

Keywords: Honours, music, practice-based, research training, undergraduate programmes.

1 INTRODUCTION

Much ambiguity remains in relation to exactly what constitutes an Honours programme in Australia and at the time of writing is a subject of scrutiny and review by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (AQF, 2013). “‘Honours’ can refer to a level of qualification or a kind of degree program, a particular kind of undergraduate experience or learning process, and a level of intellectual outcome” (Kiley, Boud, Manathunga & Cantwell, 2009, p. 6), that is:

• as an indication of superior quality within a pass degree;
• an end-on year (3+1); or
• as an embedded fourth year of study; or
• as a research-oriented undergraduate programme with research courses throughout all years.

In the creative arts these factors take on additional significance given a core focus on craft, the development of practical skills and the capacity to produce compelling creative artefacts. This also has notable implications given recent exponential growth in arts-based higher degree research (HDR) enrolments where so-called ‘practice-based’ research investigations position creative works and exegetical texts together as an integrated whole (Harrison & Draper, 2012). While there have been a number of recent studies about Australian Honours programmes (for example, Allan, 2011; Kiley et al., 2009; Zeegers & Barron, 2009), it would appear that similar research has not been conducted in relation to the creative arts. We therefore position this project as a pilot study to begin to better understand some of the issues in play, and in so doing set the stage for on-going work as a result of our preliminary findings.

2 THE SETTING

This paper examines recent experiences in the common ‘3+1’ model for Honours training at the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU). Unlike the preceding three year undergraduate activities, fourth year Honours achievement is ranked and badged via a quality nomenclature the highest of which is termed ‘first class honours’ (a high distinction). Consequently, Honours year dissertation-based programmes hold a unique position in the Australian higher education landscape – neither entirely a 1st cycle undergraduate activity nor acknowledged as a research award, they serve both as a professional qualification and as the primary PhD entry criteria across the sector (Kiley et al., 2009).

Via a combination of supervised dissertation and coursework, QCGU Honours programs provide an opportunity for advanced study in focussed areas including musicology, education, composition, performance, music technology and popular music. Especially of interest here is that following the three years of undergraduate craft studies, a rather dramatic turn appears in Honours via the introduction of a major dissertation (c. 12,000 words) together with an emphasis on self-efficacy
around a highly individualised research topic. We posit that there is much to be learned by better understanding this 'in between' transitional space in order to inform the design of Honours programmes, outcomes for musicians, and in terms of flow through to HDR training pedagogy more broadly. Salient features include: the still-fresh focus on craft/practical processes; the use of digital technologies so prevalent in undergraduate work; and in how the Honours community may reveal insights into the progression from so-called 'undergraduate thinking' to 'research thinking'.

2.1 Disciplinary considerations

Australian vocational institutions were amalgamated within universities by Federal government policy in the late 1980s. This had substantial impact on students, teachers and qualification frameworks now tied to new agendas and expectations (Draper & Cunio, 2013) as Dieter Lesage cautions,

*The insistence of universities on the obligation of a written supplement seems to demonstrate the university’s lack of confidence either in the capacity of the arts to speak in a meaningful, complex and critical way in a medium of their choosing, or in the university’s own capacity to make sound judgements on the … artistic output as such. What might happen now is that juries will mainly base their judgement on a reading of the written supplement, because it complies with a long-standing format of the doctorate, as if it were the doctorate itself, while at the same time being tempted to consider the artistic portfolio merely as a supplementary illustration.* ([2009, p. 8])

In recent times QCGU has made significant progress in relation to now well accepted designs for practice-based HDR programmes (Draper & Harrison, 2013; 2011), yet Lesage’s words (2009) still have much resonance in relation to Honours programmes in the creative arts. The Honours projects examined in this paper comprise both written dissertation and creative works which aim to be equally valued as an integrated whole. Creative components allow for flexibility in an approach to scholarship that may feature time-based works including concert performances or installations as well as other forms including original sound productions, scores, videos or web-based materials. Because of the present Australian requirements for the submission and examination of research dissertations, all elements must be submitted as one integrated work at the end of the programme (AQF, 2013), therefore multimedia materials may be attached to the dissertation. However, the relationship between live performance and digital proxy cannot truly substitute for each other. In the case of live works, parallel performance assessment in taught coursework can allow for authentic disciplinary considerations to continue and for this assessment to contribute to the overall Honours grades alongside the dissertation as ‘awarded in partial fulfilment’. The subsequent opportunity to record and submit digitised recordings of live works as a proxy ‘creative component’ serves useful purposes in terms of the student reflections on such works, together with the capacity of an examiner to assess overall coherence. This then highlights core considerations as to appropriate research methods, language and other scholarly approaches for such reflection on action ([Schön, 1987]).

3 METHODOLOGY

In this project, data collection occurred during the formative stages of the Honours first half year, from developing a proposal through to ‘confirmation’ where a detailed research design/argument is examined and assessed. At this important milestone we are centrally interested in the early thinking and evolving negotiations which take place *en route* to the final student works at end of year (and where these ideas will be examined once again based upon our findings here).

The project utilised a focus group methodology (Greenbaum, 2000) to prompt a number of indicative Honours projects, firstly via the circulation of a discussion paper followed by a roundtable dialogue with students framed by open ended-questions (see Appendix 1). Ethical clearance matters were attended to via University approval processes and all participants participated in and agreed to informed consent packages. Out of a total of 34 Honours projects (half of which did not include creative components), a total of 10 practice-based Honours students contributed to the data collection and are identified as S1 to S10 throughout this paper. Their narratives were recorded to be later collated and sifted for display according to a phenomenographic approach (Bowden, 2005) where the results follow common emergent themes as per the participant views. This material was arranged by the authors as Honours supervisors and course convenors along with member checking input from academic colleagues and by the students themselves who were able to comment on the display of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Where pertinent, divergent or common views are now examined in the following Results and Discussion sections of the paper.
4 RESULTS

A number of recurring themes emerged although not always directly corresponding to the exact question probes or their ordering in the Discussion Paper research instrument (Appendix 1). This proved to be a non-linear process in the roundtable event, yet which in later analysis nonetheless revealed a series of highly engaged articulations around key ideas as insisted by the students themselves. For display purposes these core themes are now arranged in order of a progressive trajectory as: motivation, transition, discovery, barriers, and community.

4.1 Motivation

Six students indicated that an Honours pathway had been considered in their overall tertiary planning, with four of these indicating PhD studies as a primary goal. This group understood Honours as the predetermined pathway to a PhD and were following ‘the instructions’, some of this thinking relating to a certain degree of peer influence and/or parental preconceptions. They also saw Honours as “an investment in the future” regardless of whether they could or could not use the qualification immediately after graduation in terms of further study or for employment opportunities. Some perhaps flippantly commented that they simply “wan[ed] more letters after [their] name”, but to some degree this indicated academic career prospects and as the discussion evolved, these ideas expanded to note that many students were seeking additional expertise and knowledge for future professional potential. The remaining four students of the ten said they had not considered undertaking further study until the final semester of their undergraduate degree. The primary reason for this change in their thinking was the realisation (including through advice from academic mentors) that a creative focus was possible and even desirable, and that the opportunity to develop an Honours topic proposal in the final semester of their undergraduate degree was central to their decision.

Honours was perceived by all students as a safe and constructive environment in which to study with a community of like-minded people, being pushed by academics and deadlines with instructions to follow and with access to mentors and specialised facilities. This was perceived as assisting students to understand how to go about structuring their time, how to develop themselves intellectually and creatively, through to frank awareness that “if not for deadlines I would get nothing done” (S10).

Extending on these concepts, motivation to undertake Honours was described as a pathway that is “more clearly defined” (S4), “a structured, constructed process” (S7) and “guided by a known set of goals” (S10) in contrast to continuing a personal journey outside of academia.

There was consensus that the sharing in the culture of the institution was a centrally important motivation to undertaking an Honours program. This incentive carried over from foundation degree experiences where as one student puts it,

…”being in the culture forces you, not only on the practical side, but on the intellectual side, to be a tad more intensely critical of ‘why am I doing this, does it even matter’. You are going to get a lot more ‘bang for buck’ from being in this environment because you are that much more intent on what you are producing.” (S10)

Some students indicated that they will enter the workforce or at least take a break from study for twelve months in order for their “ideas to mature” (S5), to take on what life has to offer, or to earn and establish themselves more before returning to further academic study (this was a newly formed opinion for three students). Conversely one student said he wanted to go “straight to PhD to get it done.” (S8). Others said that if their professional lives ‘took off’ they may not return, however, the idea of further study was a real consideration whereas it had not been before the Honours experience.

4.2 Transition

Without exception, before their Honours work all students understood the idea of ‘research’ as exclusively text-based activities such as “sitting in a library reading and writing” (S4), or in “reading books and gathering information” (S6). While some felt that their understanding was beginning to change, many did not yet find it completely natural to describe their creative work as research, given an emphasis on the emerging mid-year draft dissertation as a detailed research proposal. However, students continued to reinforce their newer ideas about the importance of the ‘personalisation’ of Honours, for example, “the Honours paper is exploring uncharted territory in terms of self-involvement” (S3) and most indicated that they found that their creative and intellectual work was being combined in unexpected ways (9 out of 10 participants).
While no Honours research topics had changed substantially since the early proposals, all were confidently understood to be variously “much more focussed; scope refined; depth more tangible; clarified”. Most centrally, dissertation structures and creative components were now seen as more closely aligned and as reflected in the following insightful comments:

*More and more I am realising that the creative and the written references each other all the time and there is no separating them.* (S8)

*My thinking has become pigeon-holed a bit more.* (S4)

*It’s essentially about the same thing but coming from a completely different paradigm. The way I was approaching it has flipped 180°, massively changed, now my creative and intellectual are combined.* (S10)

On a more personal level, students were in agreement that their conceptions of what it means to be ‘a researcher’ had evolved through their transition:

*My understanding has changed. A greater understanding of what research is, but also more aware that there is quite a lot that I don’t know.* (S3)

*It was going deeper into the topic, when doors started to open, and it was like, god, if I had known that before I wrote the application, it’s just huge.* (S10)

Students echoed each other’s sentiments that this transition phase continues to unfold, one indicative comment declaring that,

*… part of what I have been learning and continue to learn, is about uncovering this process [research], finding the balance. It’s not like at the start that I expected this or that, or it’s been clear the whole time, it’s something I am finding out as I go.* (S5)

### 4.3 Discovery

The demands of dissertation writing and scholarly reflection on one’s practice are still a challenge for many who commented again (as above 4.2) on ingrained perspectives that research ‘is’ the written component, characterising this as “evidence” (S5; S6), “justification” (S2; S7; S8), “self-actualisation” (S10), or as “making sense of the whole thing” (S1; S8). However, while many originally saw the intellectual and the creative as “two related but distinct things (S9)”, in expressing their current understanding students proposed “its more than they are related, they have a direct effect on each other” (S7). Similarly,

*My research is deeply informing my creative practice … this kind of internalisation of the ideas and concepts associated with the work’s inception is really essential to the creative process.* (S10)

Students stated they were beginning to understand the research itself – that is, in the processes and experiences they were gaining as an overall gestalt – as holding significant benefit for them. All were quick and firm with their agreement on this aspect where little discussion was entered into.

One broad generalisation was in relation to a changing balance between reading, writing, thinking and doing. Where practice on a musical instrument is an on-going endeavour, creative outcomes as ‘products’ may be developed in stages to be delineated as preparation, doing, refining, reviewing and action cycling as appropriate. For example,

*… if the researcher was investigating their own playing they can’t stop playing, whereas other topics lend themselves more to project-based timelines.* (S7)

It was agreed that herein the relative balances over time between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ are influenced by the nature of each project and the methods and methodology being applied. Exposing this, and consequently what balances are appropriate and productive to each, is an on-going and unfolding discovery process for students.

Overall, it is noteworthy that many perceived that the combining of intellectual and creative is “new to academia” (S5) where “the challenge is putting the two together; that hasn’t been done before ” (S5). Many them saw themselves as breaking new ground (S3, S4, S5, S7, S10), commenting that “It is a relatively new concept altogether, that you can join creative practice and research” (S5).
4.4 Barriers

Two themes emerged from the question, ‘are there any immediate concerns you see as blocking your progress?’ The first of these was succinct, with students indicating financial commitments together with finding a work-study balance as their most easily articulated difficulty, although the overall discussion indicated surprisingly low personal stress levels associated with this.

The second theme became far more complex and resulted in a lengthy, animated debate to reveal a central concern and higher order of personal stress as self-doubt. In this, many expressed their immediate concerns regarding ‘blocks to progress’ as essentially relating to their own lack of prior knowledge and experience with engaging in research processes. Some students expressed this fear in terms of an ever-evolving, but still indeterminate commitment as,

… it’s frightening because I don’t know when it is going to stop changing – when do I start writing this thing and it doesn’t change. (S4)

I look back at all the notes I made for myself … and the course of actually doing research for this thing and it is like, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. I am deadly terrified that I will get to writing the conclusions for this thing and I will be like – wait just a minute – wrong. (S10)

This theme continued to re-surface throughout the roundtable event to reveal key differences between individual disciplinary aspirations and QCGU Honours programme structures. On the one hand, for music technology with Honours (B.MT) (including composers, performers and sound producers), on the other, for music with Honours (B.Mus) (including composers, performers and educators). Six B.MT students agreed that the early research training they received during their undergraduate program was invaluable. Staged, progressive, built on previous knowledge, culminating in doing their own work that was important to them. Alternatively, a B.Mus student indicated that

I think the only time during our [foundation] degree where academic writing or anything like that was actively talked about was exploring music [in] first semester first year – and that’s all there is. You go into these research subjects and they are watered down, you get pre-constructed questions and that’s about the biggest experience you get from it. (S1)

However all four B.Mus students were also keen to say that their program experience was positive given the regular, high quality one-to-one instrumental instruction and concert performance opportunities, but that the leap from third to fourth year was a “massive mind-shift” (S3, S4, S10), from practical to intellectual. Left to their own devices, some were able to seek out research courses as electives in their foundation programme, but these proved to be what they saw as “constructed” experiences in comparison to their present Honours work. They felt that for the first time in their university experience that Honours was ‘personalised’ and “intensely relevant to myself and the instrument I play” (S4). Personalisation arose as central for all participants. There was unanimous agreement that previously, “when you get handed a question, you know, you just go read a book” (S1) and that “the personal tailoring meant that we learned so much more” (S3).

Regarding foundation degree activities, some felt that if they had tried to do something with freedom too early, that they “would have fallen flat on their faces” (S6). However, there was some disagreement where some felt that a tight structure was important for them, whereas others believed that certain freedoms earlier in the program would have been useful, now wiser in hindsight. Most B.MT students said they would not have made the decision to undertake Honours if they had undertaken research courses too early, but after all the foundational skill development, it was the richness of the experience allowed in the final undergraduate year research paper that convinced them they wanted to take their ideas further. There was general agreement between B.MT students that this staging was highly valued, and an overall acknowledgement by B.Mus students that a similar approach in their undergraduate program would have benefitted them.

4.5 Community

There was recognition that the peer community had a highly visible sense of “a group of like-minded people”. This was partly a result of common Honours courses, the closer peer interactions around central points of inquiry and the enhanced level of intellectual activity they were mutually engaged in. Other collaborative structures were perceived as core to Honours development thus far, and this included many of the prioritised arrangements for access to physical resources including practice rooms, recording studios and performance venues, as well as self-directed use of software, laboratories, and e-learning or data management systems.
There was an increased perception of teachers as artists in a community of collaboration. Because of this, it was also clear that students respected the heightened interpersonal relationships with their mentors and supervisors and that the nature of on-going critical feedback was perceived as pivotal to the students’ overall sense of trust. Six of the students considered their closer relationships with their academic supervisors to be one of the most beneficial experiences to date – supervisors often inspired artistic thinking (to be backed up with argument and rigour), and overall had encouraged a very different type of engagement than students had experienced in their foundation degree. Students cited philosophical and intellectual changes as fostered by one-to-one supervisor meetings as fundamental, that the process was less about the information they were given, but more about the ways in which they might find and transform information into knowledge through applied practice. As one student commented,

*I come out of those [supervisor] meetings and go home and do research with a fresh brain – I’m thinking about it differently than I was before.* (S7)

While students consistently made note of the pedagogical differences between undergraduate and Honours undertakings, they were also quick to clarify that they saw this as a natural part of their development. As one student stated, “I needed that earlier time to develop” (S6), another that, “it was almost that I had to wait so long for that, that I appreciate it that much more” (S7). A general consensus was that the recent emergence of indeterminacy in relation to ‘self’ was pivotal to a richer understanding of what it means to be a creative artist, for example:

*The biggest thing that’s coming through for me is that it is going to be less about what I do know and more about what I don’t.* (S10)

*…that’s not being humble either, I think it’s the reality of the beast.* (S8)

Here and throughout, students expressed a high level of efficacy in that their self-esteem was in no way diminished by these realisations. To the contrary, their sense of self was in some ways bolstered by viewing these realisations as an indication of potency in their intellectual and creative engagements, and that they are more aware of how their aspirations continue to transform throughout the research process. One student sums up,

*It’s deep concepts and really big ideas that I haven’t had to grapple with before. I haven’t cried yet, maybe that’s a good sign … or maybe crying will be the breakthrough [group laughter].* (S3)

## 5 DISCUSSION

In what follows we present a further re-sifting and representation of the roundtable discussion, this time taking into account the insights of local academics together with a reflexive acknowledgement of recent HDR investigations (Draper & Cunio, 2013; Draper & Harrison, 2013; 2011; Harrison, 2012; Harrison & Draper, 2012). In doing so, we return to the opening gambit for this paper, that is, as an Honours pilot study seeking to better understand:

- If and how this community may reveal insights into the progression from so-called ‘undergraduate thinking’ to ‘research thinking’;
- possible impacts for musicians as professionals and/or continuing research candidates;
- Honours programme design and/or flow through to HDR training pedagogy more broadly.

These topics will be now be explored and expanded upon accordingly.

### 5.1 On lifelong learning

Throughout, the idea that one’s work was ‘never really done’ was a reoccurring revelation. Uncertainty and fear was expressed as part of this, but at the same time proved exhilarating for many in their embracing of open-ended outcomes as important new work. In the Honours year therefore, the primary insight would appear to be concerned with emergence of so called ‘research thinking’ now more accurately understood in terms of an acceptance of the notion of lifelong learning. However, this discussion was also interspersed with elements of comparison between foundation undergraduate programmes and what was occurring in the Honours experience. It would appear that despite best pedagogical intentions for scaffolded approaches to earlier undergraduate training, the idea of individual development or personalisation in some cases may be a less well activated part of the mix.
Perhaps some of this may be unsurprising given an increasing emphasis in recent years on compliance, national educational frameworks, and systematised requirements set by governing authorities – all of which if left to its own devices, moves away from customisation toward ‘one size fits all’. Within a given institution this is often implemented via a fine-grained focus on the building blocks at the subject /assessment /weighting level and perhaps less so in terms of the meta considerations for individual trajectories within the higher education machine. For the creative arts, individuality needs to be an obvious priority given graduate destinations that will include portfolio careers and an emphasis on innovation and originality (Bartleet, Bennett, Bridgestock, Draper, Harrison & Schippers, 2013). Some of B.Mus Honours experiences here explicitly indicate the contrary: that earlier foundational designs were ‘constructed’ with predetermined skills-based outcomes in mind (sometimes appropriate given undergraduate inexperience) and which proved surprisingly narrow given the only recent opportunities to explore one’s self in the context of an original research project.

5.2 The idea of practice-based research

Writing about music is like dancing about architecture [variously attributed to Laurie Anderson, Elvis Costello, Frank Zappa and others]. (Quote Investigator, 2010).

It would seem that students once had similar views about writing, or at least in terms of a disconnect between the idea of research as ‘reading and writing’ and music-making as performance of craft. While these binaries are not entirely discarded in the Honours year (or beyond for that matter), it is also evident that the combination of dissertation and creative endeavour has been a powerful lever to expose an authentic understanding of practice-based research for many. Moreover, it is the ‘in between’ location of these students so close to fresh experiences from school and undergraduate work that makes for an extended reading of a space that would otherwise be relegated to loftier HDR territory. While many M.Mus and DMA candidates and graduates are familiar with the struggles and negotiations of practice-based research and professional music communities as a whole (Draper & Harrison, 2011; Harrison & Draper, 2012), Honours students on the other hand presented naïve but fascinating assertions that the integration of intellectual and creative processes is quite new to academia, and therefore their own work is unique in this respect. Partially this might represent an admirable commitment to the personal project, including a necessary myopia which is also common in HDR projects elsewhere. But otherwise, this prompts further reflection on the somewhat limited idea of ‘community’ as expressed, and as to implications for if or how this might be further leveraged.

While many students talked at length about the positive experiences of working with supervisors and mentors, and of understanding and realising the benefits of a community of practice as only recently revealed – this was also surprisingly limited in scope given the richness and history of the wider context immediately around them. The Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (QCRC, 2013) was established more than a decade ago and now presides over a range of Federally-funded research projects, academic research clusters including music education, community music, music technology, and artistic practice as research. It particular, the QCRC hosts and mentors academic staff as active researchers and supervisors of HDR candidates now numbering in excess of 80 per year at the time of writing. More than half of these projects are practice-based and many have graduated in recent years to local and international acclaim (Draper & Harrison, 2013), yet in Honours there would seem to be little conception of these matters despite aspirations for further HDR study by some.

Some of this may be related to atypical departmental /sub-disciplinary boundaries in conservatoria, nor are all Honours supervisors QCRC members and there would appear to be as yet little direct transfer of the wider practice-based exemplars to Honours students. Further to this, the history of local HDR developments worked backwards or ‘top down’ from academic /professional sensibilities, whereas the Honours programmes evolved ‘bottom up’ from undergraduate structures in a variety of formats over time (Kiley, et al., 2009) to meet somewhere between the two cultures.

5.3 Implications

At the time of writing as it happens, all QCGU degree programs are under review according to the terms of the recent Australian Quality Framework (AQF, 2013) recommendations for the application of consistent learning standards and outcomes. As part of this, the faculty has the opportunity to draw upon a number of local studies into undergraduate structures, career destinations and the HDR continuum more broadly. Based upon the work conducted in this paper, we therefore posit the implications for revised Honours and/or inter-programme schema as follows.
5.3.1 Supervision and local culture

At one time it would have been conventional that early Honours work be steered by supervisors to ‘safer’ grounds on the basis of familiar, traditional research training approaches for conducting a literature review, devising a methodology and designing research questions. This would have been based on ‘bottom up’ presumptions about a progression from shorter undergraduate essays to the lengthier Honours dissertation while assuming a certain impartiality for research according to the prevailing musicological/historical stance of older career academics. In this study however, we begin to see the effects of the flow through from a new generation of younger course convenors and supervisors who recognise and are able to advise on the development of personalised, practice-based Honours proposals given their own qualifications and/or interactions with the HDR cohort as a whole. In the year of this study, we now see fully half of the Honours cohort engaged in practice-based projects for the first time in the history of this conservatorium.

As the pedagogical steering capacity rises, it is also emerging that this space has the potential to inform other structures both below and above it. Indirectly, this is occurring in research colloquia where the M.Mus and doctoral cohorts gather, however this does not as yet include Honours students given some lack of clarity in relation to the 3+1 undergraduate associations. Alternately, there is some sharing of M.Mus and Honours interactions in a common research training course and this may present one of several useful options for future programme design (see further, below). Overall however, it would be useful to firstly seek greater transparency across all of the informal boundaries between research training cohorts and supervisors in order to foster a greater understanding of the local practice-based research culture, its methods, tools and resources.

5.3.2 Resource management

All though there is a limited allowance for external entry into Honours programmes, it would be fair to say that most Honours students bring much experience around access and use of the local resources given their prior years of enculturation. Conversely, the M.Mus increasingly takes on new external enrolments, while the DMA almost exclusively comprises mature musicians from around Australia or abroad who have completed much earlier undergraduate studies elsewhere. A ‘hidden’ curriculum therefore may be quite substantial (Draper & Hitchcock, 2008) and this includes day-to-day use of BlackBoard blended learning systems, protocols and processes for accessing practice rooms, recording studios, computer laboratories and/or performance venues.

For the roundtable discussion conducted in this paper, considerations around the application of digital technologies proved notable through its seeming invisibility. Honours students were comfortable in the application of various multimedia tools to assist in the presentation of their exegeses as part dissertation, part ‘creative product’. This was in contrast to similar probes into M.Mus and DMA designs (Draper and Cunio, 2013; Draper & Harrison, 2011) where a ‘just in time’ approach eventually secured graduate outcomes, but the pathway may have been variously fraught, uniformed or propositioned at the last minute. Here then we believe that much might be gained via greater transparency across Honours, M.Mus and DMA interactions – that the more mature practice-based confidence of the senior students inspire and inform the less experienced, but also from the other direction, that the embedded knowledge of the undergraduate cohort accelerate access to resources, tools and digital techniques through local experience and practical examples of works in progress.

5.3.3 Programme design

In the forthcoming AOQF review (2013), it would seem that a common fourth B.Mus Honours year may be an outcome given that one of the requirements is that all testamurs must reflect the name of the degree programme (departmental structures do not presently align with this). While common research training courses would allow for disciplinary variation including both traditional research design (for example, musicology, history, music education) or practice-based undertakings (composition, performance, sound art), it is the potential for wider peer-based knowledge transfer that is of most relevance to this study. Also under scrutiny, there are strikingly similar considerations for the M.Mus and DMA and one outcome may that that all pre-confirmation coursework and colloquia be physically shared for both HDR and Honours candidates (albeit via differing course coding schema and notional ‘learning outcomes’). In addition, in relation to undergraduate preparation and as has been revealed in this study, there are aspects of the B.MT programme that have received wider attention. This includes the model that Honours research proposal coursework will be more formally adopted and similarly located in the final year of all undergraduate programmes, and part of which is designed to explicitly allow for personalised artistic development as required.
6 CONCLUSION

We began this piece as a proposition for a pilot study to better understand the Honours cohort as an important ‘in between’ phase for musicianship and practice-based research considerations. In doing so this paper has revealed a number of implications for future work, including a more widespread understanding of allied degree programmes as a result of our preliminary findings here. Following this mid-candidature investigation, it is intended to reframe these findings via a second enquiry design scheduled for the final stages of the Honours programme for comparative purposes. What was unexpected in this process however, was that the students themselves found the roundtable data-gathering session to be valuable in its own right – that the nature of the discussion stimulated insights in ways that may not been evident elsewhere. Consequently it has been proposed that exactly such events should be staged from time to time across the program as a site for refection, wider consideration and ‘rite of passage’ as one observer put it.

In returning to Lesage’s concerns that “the artistic portfolio [may serve as] merely as a supplementary illustration” (2009, p. 8), we are confident that this institution has made great inroads into ensuring that this is not the case, and as has been evidenced throughout this paper. But clearly, there also remains much work to be done given on-going accountability standards, budget pressures and sector-wide reviews, while at the same time, an ever-evolving demographic of interdisciplinary student profiles and early career academics as supervisors brings great promise for the future.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1

Roundtable discussion points

1) Why had you originally intended to undertake an Honours programme? To what end?

2) What is your Honours topic? Has your thinking changed about this project since you submitted your original proposal? If so, in what ways?

3) How do you now understand the relationship between the dissertation and your creative work? Or, between ‘doing it’ and ‘writing about it’.

4) What are the most beneficial experiences you have had in Honours?

5) Alternatively, are there any immediate concerns you see as blocking your progress?

6) What do you think would help you most in terms of the remainder of your Honours work: in terms of seminar topics, coursework or supervision arrangements or other?

7) Are University on-line resources of any benefit to your work? If so how? Are there other flexible arrangements or infrastructure that you see as central your work?

8) Describe yourself and your professional setting, including: How many hours of paid work each week are you undertaking, and how may any of this be related to your Honours topic?

9) What are your aims following your completion of Honours? Have any opportunities emerged since commencing Honours?